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The role of Portuguese heritage in local development: Asilah and El Jadida (Morocco)

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O papel da herança portuguesa no desenvolvimento local : Arzila e El Jadida (Marrocos)

Les intérêts du Portugal pour l'Afrique du Nord, entre le XIV^e et le XVI^e siècle, étaient dus à la volonté militaire de renforcer ses positions territoriales, de protéger et contrôler ses routes commerciales, à la volonté d'expansion impériale mais aussi aux mythes de la "reconquista" de la péninsule ibérique (Bravo Nieto, 2004, 7) et de Jérusalem (Carvalho, 1942, 26, Cortesão, 1993, 22 mais aussi Oliveira Marques, 1998, 120).

La construction de fortifications côtières fut subordonnée à la volonté politique de la Couronne portugaise ; cette volonté externe au territoire a réglé leurs implantations, aussi bien au niveau géopolitique qu'au niveau architectural et urbain. Les Portugais ont donc structuré une armature côtière de bases militaires et commerciales qui, depuis la prise de Ceuta en 1415, s'est progressivement étendue vers le sud et l'orient parallèlement au développement de la puissance économique et maritime portugaise.

Cette expansion se réalise en s'appuyant sur les capacités de navigation mais aussi sur l'introduction de la défense en tir de flanc, qui concrétise le front bastionné. L'analyse de la composante militaire de l'héritage portugais au Maroc permet de saisir le passage des fortifications médiévales à celles de la Renaissance, de l'enceinte de Ksar Seghir aux fortifications de Safi, Asilah et Azemmour en passant par le cas splendide de Aguz pour arriver jusqu'à celui de Mazagão/El Jadida : ce sont là des exemples qui témoignent des modifications radicales que la morphologie des fortifications a subie entre le Moyen Âge et la Renaissance, entre l'époque du combat à l'arme blanche et celle de l'utilisation massive des armes à feu et du canon.

This text propose a dynamic interpretation of the “heritage phenomenon” which is involving the architectural and urban inheritances of the Portuguese presence inside the nowadays Morocco (1415-1769). This on going process integrates the heritage into a strategic (re)design of urban territories. The process is an inclusive one, which is concerning several scales, from a really local level to international and conceptual ones.

The attention is focusing mainly the public spaces, because of their visibility and their roles into the landscape, and the landscape planning. At the same time, public spaces were submitted to less transformation than private ones; therefore they are the major spatial link to the Lusitanian presence. Portuguese heritage is nowadays a global player in the Moroccan process that's updating to the 21st century the image of the Kingdom. The targets of this new image are the international public but also, and even more, the national one.

Portuguese heritage in Morocco is a long lasting one but, at the same time, it is so old that we can say that's a “past of the past”, completely disconnected to the nowadays identity and post-colonial issues; there are no direct links with their contemporary existence.

Due to this distance, the luso-maroccans¹ architectures and their “conquest” by the nowadays actors are an interesting study case: they are “new” instruments to implement local and national development strategies.

Towards the « Great South » and India: the constitution of today’s Heritage

The interest of Portugal crown to the Northern Africa started at the end of 14th century, when the new country fought for its empowerment and to enhance the sea coast control over the sea ways to the Mediterranean. Both myths of Iberic “*reconquista*” and Crusades to the Holy Land were present in the actors minds (Carvalho, 1942, 26, Cortesão, 1993, 22 and also Oliveira Marques, 1998, 120) even if the “epic era” of great discoveries quickly took the main rule in mythical and material issues.

Starting from 1415, Portuguese built up a network of coastal military and commercial settlements covering the whole Moroccan Atlantic coast – only the Rabat-Salé nucleus was ever independent.

For the history of military architecture, Portuguese presence in Morocco is a fabulous example of the transformation from the late middle age forts – as Ksar Seghir or the Menagem tower in Asilah – to the renaissance fortresses as Mazagão/El Jadida passing through the fortifications of Safi, Asilah, Azemmour and the fantastic Aguz. All of them are showing the several transformation steps existing from white weapons to guns defence systems (Moreira, 1992, 119).



Image 1 – Proto bastion recently (re)plastered. Azemmour 2007 (© R. Carabelli)

Those settlements were, mainly, ports and fortresses disconnected from the local inner-land, a constructive condition to prepare the global network system of the future multi oceans empire.

The tentative of a protectorate

The first part of Portuguese presence in Northern Africa was a really striking one, in the two main colonization areas – the Tingitan peninsula in the north and the Doukkala and Safi region in the centre – they tried to constitute a protectorate before the Saharan “empty” zone. Important towns as Azemmour (Azamor) or Larache signed protection agreements with the Portuguese crown and integrating several local chiefs and *cheikhs* into a Portuguese led feudal system. The power of Portuguese presence in this period was evident when, in 1525, the chieftains of Safi, Azemmour and Mazagão allied themselves and marched over the capital Marrakech, they were able to besiege the town even if they didn’t conquest it.

¹ I’m using this composed word in order to indicate their double statute condition: surely Portuguese and definitely Moroccan.

The architectural production of this period (1415-1541) distinguish itself for the presence of buildings clearly dedicated to the local administration and civil purposes as the Safi cathedral, the Menagem tower in Asilah (Arzila) or the Governor palace in Azemmour.

Safi was the largest Portuguese town in central Morocco within 1471 and 1545: the “castle of the sea”, the Ketchla - a military citadel build during Almohade period and heavily transformed in the 15th century – and the rests of the cathedral are there to remember this prosperous time.

The case of Asilah (Arzila) is a significant example of this period. It was conquered in 1471 and the Wattasside sultan recognized it with a first protection agreement lasting 20 years. In 1510, still being Asilah under the Portuguese rule, the Manuelin government sent the royal architect – Diogo Boytac – to built up new walls and a local government building, the Menagem tower. While the walls were integrating the new technical and strategic rules of war, the tower was drawn in a really old style: “... *Boytac realizou em Arzila ... e torre de menagem de carácter quase feudal ...*” (Moreira, 1994). This kind of obsolete building shows up the monumental meaning of a territorial possession more then a military instrument.

Tower’s dimensions are inflated; it was a landmark of Bragança family power, the walls and some other towers had the real defensive rule. Saadian’s army took temporary the town from 1550 to 1577 when Portuguese rejoin the control. Control which they lost definitively in 1589, when the king Dom Sebastião leaded his army from Arzila towards Fez; he was stopped in the famous battle of Three kings in El Ksar El Kebir/Alcazar-quivir.

The Portuguese coastal system was constituted by a net of harbours which were more connected with the sea – and via the sea to the other possessions and the motherland – than to the inner land, this lack of local geographical and territorial roots induced a transformation into the colonial strategy.

The castling time

Starting from 1541, a second approach was developed. Face to the local empowerment, the king Dom João III decided to leave the places still under his rule in order to concentrate the effort in a single place, Mazagão/El Jadida. The king asked to the Pope the authorisation to abandon some places but the answer arrived when those were already fallen under Saadian control.

The “castling” strategy was based on a single point which was chosen among all possessions to be fortified as better as possible. The location was chosen because of the geomorphologic structure of the coast: a long beach shore with a rock area to install the fortress. “*Les Portugais [...] apprécièrent particulièrement le climat ainsi que les qualités nautiques de la grande baie où ils se trouvaient,*” (Goulven, 1917, 244).

In 1503 the probably already existing tower named El Boreja was conquered by some Portuguese coming from a battleship, it was enlarged in 1514 (Moreira, 1994, 132 and Correia, 1923, 60), when a

castle was built, keeping the administrative status of Castelo Real. In this time, Mazagão was under the rule of Azemmour's governor, and both had the power town of Safi as local reference.

When, in 1541, the situation changed, it was chosen to make a *fortaleza roqueira*² able to support the new strategy: a inexpugnably war machine. Benedetto da Ravenna (Carabelli, 1999 and Moreira 2001)³, the chief of Spanish' military engineer was called to design the new fortress "*à semelhança das que se fazem em Itália*".

Built during 1541 and 1542, the construction of this renascence forteress was an epical activity, leaded on site by Miguel de Arruda, the future first military engineer of Portuguese crown. This fortress, the nowadays walled quarter of El Jadida, was the last Portuguese heavy material intervention in Morocco. The new town resisted to a violent blockade in 1562 and it was under a quite continuous military pressure. It resisted up to 1769 when, after a long siege the Portuguese ended their presence in northern Africa.

A heritage process: from historical integration to contemporary active participation

The French protectorate placed immediately the Portuguese inheritance under safeguard. The Sultan Moulay Youssef edicted a *dahir* on November the 1st, 1912 under the instigation of the *Commissaire Résident de la République française au Maroc* enlarging the military servitudes in El Jadida to the walls, the Cistern and all the "historic" places of Mazagão/El Jadida, at that time called Mazagan. In this way they entered into the formal and official heritage, integrating the national safeguard body, the *Service des Antiquités, Beaux-arts et Monuments Historiques* that was also created in November 1912 (the 28th).

² As there were called the first renascence fortresses, literally "fortress using guns firing stone balls"

³ The design of this walled area was long-time attributed to Francisco da Hollanda while the attribution to Benedetto da Ravenna is more recent. Recently Prof. Rafael Moreira – who laid down the attribution with his 2001 publication – shows some doubts. Actually, the paternity attribution should not be considered 100% sure.



Image 2 – Cistern, interior of the water reserve. El Jadida, 2003 (© R. Carabelli)

The modern notion of heritage and its protection are symbiotic to the colonization time, and it is nowadays heavily linked to cultural identity. Because of it, colonial inheritance rarely integrate the common heritage area, it is too frequently connected to requests on territorial and cultural issues, a pledge that is not yet cicatrized.

Portuguese heritage, because of his distance in historical dimension, and also because colonizers were defeated, can be used as a special but not disturbing object collecting both heritage and colonial status. The independent Morocco relayed from 1956 the French oriented protection of heritage and the Portuguese heritage conserved its rank into National heritage: not a priority but an existing and recognized one.

In the last two decades the modernization of the country, the transfer of western models and tourism but also the increasing Moroccan richness enhanced the role of heritage into the economical and living issues. The reference to “traditional” heritage is always the most important one but collateral “markets” exist and they are transforming the relationship to the colonial inheritance, even the “old” colonial presence.

Simple population don’t know about the Portuguese heritage in Morocco, but there are always more tourists and cultivated Moroccans which are looking to this “secondary” heritage as an important part of their image of Morocco.

Two different cases building transformation seem significant for the use of Portuguese heritage as cultural and material instruments for local development. Nevertheless, these two cases implemented really different strategies to boost theirs territories and theirs heritages.

Asilah and the Menagem tower

Asilah was ruled by Spain from 1912 to 1956 and even after the independence, the town never left a secondary level into cities rank. The end of Tangiers international statute transformed Asilah in a sort of a satellite of this big and important city that’s only 40 kilometers to the north. The main economical activity is the tourism and, in this sense, the Portuguese heritage plays its essential task.

The expressive pattern of nude stones help the creation of a fascinating ambiance which lead this town to the position of a picturesque and fascination town, “easy to use”: seaside, interesting tourism facilities able to mix national and international tourism, good standards in services and a clear identity. Asilah has an autonomous self standing image, built in several years of conscientious heritage actions linked to a successful cultural festival.

A great part of the town is still represented by the *intra-muros* quarter, the walls are complete and the view from the sea is really spectacular: the old tall walls manage the panorama of the double silhouette of the Raissouli palace and the Menagem tower.



Image 3 – Skyline in Asilah. Palm trees, Menagem tower, walls and

Raissouli palace 2003 (© R. Carabelli)

The complete circle of city walls is visible and it exposes its nude stones⁴ to local, national and international tourists and the inhabitants, creating several picturesque scenes. The walls make up a complex panorama, well exploited by commerce activities and coffee shops that are colonizing the large walking path along the walls; the partially underground market made in 1985 doesn't interfere with the global image of the walled city. Several towers integrate the walls but the most important is certainly the Menagem one.

A formal, informal actor

The local economy, up to the 1970s, was based on fishery and agriculture; during the summer season the town transformed itself in a budget seaside station: a lot of tourists – mainly national and Spanish – were installed into temporary rented inhabitant's houses.

In 1972 a small group of people coming from the local upper-class bourgeoisie - leaded by M. Ben Aïssa a charismatic and powerful politician⁵- founded the cultural association Al Muhit and in 1978 started the Festival International d'Asilah. The president remembers this glorious birth: "*Il y a vingt cinq ans, c'était la naissance du projet artistique et culturel d'Assilah connu par la suite sous le nom du Festival Culturel International d'Assilah. C'était le début, le tout début. Le début de toutes choses dans la ville : tous les services, infrastructures et installations. La ville en avait cruellement besoin. (...) Nous avons créé l'Association Culturelle Al Mouhit qui était la première organisation non gouvernementale dans notre pays*" (Ben Aïssa, 2003, p. 4).

⁴ Walls and towers show theirs stones. It wasn't the case at Portuguese time because there were plastered with the aim of making them as smooth as possible for ballistic reasons.

⁵ Mr. Mohamed Ben Aïssa was major of Asilah, Ministry of culture, Ambassador in the U.S.A. and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The festival was a great catalyst and, connected with attentive local development policies, Asilah was growing up economically and socially. The great problem was to consolidate this transformation, finding the way to built up the bases for a second large improvement of local status and standards.

Asilah is a very nice place, but it had nothing able do distinguish it from other nice places in Morocco and in the Mediterranean. The Festival was, and it is, really important and largely recognised but it is still an event in a place, spot dimension hardly appropriate by the whole town. A landmark could be significant to convey the new image of this dynamic town. The first action in this direction was made be the Melehi family: the father – Mohamed – was the festival co-founder, with M. Ben Aïssa, and his son Youssef, build a really modern landmark for Asilah. It works and, at the same time, shows the way: Asilah needed an own symbolic “trade-mark” and a piece of Portuguese heritage offers both a trade and a land mark: the Menagem tower.

Large, impressive and well located, the tower could represent the transformation of the town. The historical downtown was rehabilitated and awarded with the "Aga Khan Prize of Architecture and Urban Planning" in 1990, the nowadays development is connected to tourism and seaside, the main feature of the town is a cultural event, the festival. The tower is on the harbour, it is visible from both inside the walls and the seaside and it is, clearly, a cultural heritage. It needed a restoration process in order to keep – again – its symbolic role, not any more to show up the Portuguese crown and Dom Manuel I but the nowadays leading group.

The chance was kept by both the Al Mouhit association and the Fundação C. Goulbenkian⁶; the first one leaded the local request for a large restoration⁷ and the second one funded it. It is now the symbol of the success story of a local development leaded by cultural instruments and it concentrates the local heritage narration.

⁶ The Gulbenkian foundation has a program for Portuguese heritage restoration all over the world, it was already in Morocco with the monument in Cap Bojador commemorating the first arrival of Portuguese ships in 1434

⁷ It is more proper talk about a reconstruction or, even, about a re-invention of the upper tower. This issue is a major one because the reconstruction didn't respect the usual standard for heritage restoration and the product is Walt Disney oriented result. Probably the reason of this choice is in the symbolic image which was looked for. It was requested by the Moroccan association to the Portuguese one: *"La proposition initiale est partie du côté marocain : il y a presque dix ans déjà, Son Excellence Mohammed Benaïssa, à l'époque Ministre de la Culture, et aujourd'hui comme hier ami du Portugal et ami personnel, a pris l'initiative de s'adresser à la Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian. Cette approche, qui découle de la volonté clairvoyante de Sa Majesté le Roi Hassan II de réaffirmer de plus en plus les liens entre nos deux pays, a reçu immédiatement l'accueil positif de la Fondation."* José BLANCO, in: FUNDAÇÃO CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN, 1995.



Image 4 – Menagem tower. Asilah 2003 (© R. Carabelli)

The two private actors – the Al Mouhit association with the reference of M. Ben Aïssa and the Goulbenkian Foundation – (re)created a new Luso-Moroccan space, able to represent the town, to integrate the contemporary step of Asilah development and to lead it to the 21st century. It shows and represents the considerable renovation in all town sectors (economical, social and cultural ones) and, at the same time, it merges the global wishes to mark the presence of Portuguese and Portuguese culture at the world scale.

El Jadida, toward the official acknowledgment

El Jadida was the main Portuguese fortress in Morocco up to 1769 when the final siege happened. Leaving their town, Portuguese undermined the quarter, probably to avoid the weapon recovery by locals but not respecting the agreement with the Moroccan army and killing several soldiers. Therefore the king decided to abandon the place, and named it Al Madouma (The Abandoned).

In 1821, the Jewish community of Azemmour (Azamor, ten kilometres to the north) asked to the sultan Moulay Abderrahmane the authorisation to colonize Al Madouma. He approved and changed the name in El Jadida (The New one). For Mazagão started a new history based on international commerce. Upgrading the old harbour, the town had a major asset for shipping activities, and it rose up to the main port of Morocco before being eclipsed by Casablanca. During the French protectorate it played the role of a secondary town, with a pleasant climate that supports tourism; after the independence the development of the port for phosphate in Jorf Lasfar introduced an industrial asset to this town.

Regarding Portuguese heritage, El Jadida is a really rich pole, composed mainly by renaissance walls, churches and the Cistern, the former castle modified in 1542. It is really difficult establish the amount of Portuguese vestiges in living houses because of the transformations realized in the last two centuries. Nevertheless, the *intra-muros* quarter, the “*ville portugaise*”, shows a relevant architectural homogeneity and the urban settlement still gives an idea about the Portuguese presence. Unlucky, this old town was implementing the same run-down process of other historical towns, within the integration of lower-income people.

The arrival of a new key-actor for heritage

During the 1980s, the local governor decided to start a restoration process for the fortress and the internal quarter; it was a really simple one targeting to a *mise-en-scene*, without attention to the specific heritage legacies. Scientifically was a drama: concrete drips over potential archaeological sites and arbitrary reconstruction of building elements. Nevertheless, this one was the first public act of contemporary attention to this heritage that, finally, is a colonial and not a local one.

Only a decade passed before the installation of the major actor in the field of Moroccan-Portuguese heritage: the *Centre d'études et de recherche du patrimoine maroco-lusitanien*. It is a branch of Ministry of Culture, created in strict cooperation with the Portuguese one with a board composed by experts from the two nations. It was officially created on January the 30th, 1995 even if it was inaugurated on the former July.

Located in El Jadida, this new actor is in charge of the whole Portuguese heritage in Morocco. Based on scientific rules, its actions modified completely the approach to this heritage, and the impact on the El Jadida quarter is really significant.

A scientific restoration plan is on going and the Centre prepared a candidature to the Unesco heritage list for the Portuguese town. Unlucky the first release of the application was rejected but, after some modification, it was finally accepted in 2004 under the name of: “Portuguese City of Mazagan (El Jadida)”.

The inscription in the Unesco list was the opportunity to modify the whole El Jadida downtown, introducing a new landscape, attentive to the heritage and also keeping into consideration the nowadays needs for this town. Portuguese town became – formally but also informally – a pole of the town transformation; its position at the crossroads of the shore and the 19th and 20th century’s town plays an active role into town organization.



Image 5 – Door of the sea, Portuguese harbour, bastion and chapel of Saint Sebastian.

El Jadida 2002 (© R. Carabelli)

Territorial, architectural and heritage catalysts

As we have seen, two heritage and territorial strategies for local development are based on former Portuguese heritage. Asilah leaded the movement with a “private” action that integrates the heritage into a global territorial strategy: the Menagem tower become the material support of a success story and shape the image of the town. El Jadida follows the heritage mood with a late of one or two decades; the Portuguese city became a reference for the town development. The empowerment is leaded by the

“public”, the local actor is an institutional one, the link to development is not direct like in the case of Asilah, but it has a global effect on several scales: local, national and international.

The main difference in these cases is represented by the kind and statute of the major actors, the “catalysts”. In the case of the private led development in Asilah, represented by M. Mohamed Ben Aïssa, the picturesque potentiality of Portuguese heritage offered the way to show up the accomplishment of a radical transformation of this small town, the Menagem tower become an icon, a symbol, a logo.

The *Centre d'études et de recherche du patrimoine maroco-lusitanien* is now leading the heritage strategy for Portuguese heritage in El Jadida (and in the whole Morocco); the results are different but actually really interesting. The scientific approach designs a territorial appropriation at an international level; the Portuguese heritage integrates the local potentiality of the town but also the national and international space of cultural references.

While the Portuguese heritage in Asilah helps in showing the subject of development, in El Jadida it is the subject of development. Global condition, heritage atmosphere and the kind of catalyst actors of heritage strategies produced two processes of transformation based on this Portuguese and Moroccan heritage which is integrating as better as possible the nowadays life. These components of the material inheritance are producing a new geography, a new projection of the global spirit which is giving to those buildings a new life and new aims to achieve: the better way to enhance the significance of their historical and cultural value.

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